

# The Mongols and Interregional Empires

*Swarming like locusts over the face of the earth, they [the Mongols] have brought terrible devastation to the eastern parts [of Europe], laying it waste with fire and carnage. After having passed through the land of the Saracens [Muslims], they have razed cities, cut down forests, overthrown fortresses, pulled up vines, destroyed gardens, killed townspeople and peasants.*

—Matthew Paris, from the *Chronica Majora* (1240)

The *Mongols* of central Asia marched across much of Eurasia throughout the thirteenth century, leaving destruction and chaos in their wake. The reputation of the Mongols for slaughter spread even farther than their actual conquest. Matthew Paris had no firsthand knowledge of the Mongols as he wrote from the safe vantage point of a Benedictine abbey in England. Like Paris, most writers of the time focused on Mongol atrocities. However, in their quest for blood and treasure, the Mongols also sparked a period of interregional connection and exchange at a level that the world had not experienced in a thousand years.

## The Mongols and Their Surroundings

In the twelfth century, the Mongols were multiple clans of nomadic pastoralists living north of the *Gobi Desert* in East Asia. Life on the arid Asian steppes was harsh, and it shaped the Mongol culture. Mongols were pastoral nomads who herded goats and sheep and were also hunter-foragers. They expected everyone, male and female, to become skilled horse riders, and they highly valued courage, in hunting and warfare. The Mongols were surrounded by other tribes—the Tatars, the Naimans, the Merkits, and the powerful Jurchen in northern China. The Mongols coveted the relative wealth of tribes and kingdoms that were located closer to the Silk Roads and had easier access to luxury goods such as silk clothing and gold jewelry. These early Mongols dressed plainly in long robes and pants made of pelts and had few possessions other than a *yurt*, a circular, felt-covered tent; horses; and some basic tools used in hunting and herding.

Craftworkers, miners, and others with skills, such as the ability to read and write, were recruited for the Mongol Empire. Others were used as laborers for tasks such as carrying looted goods back to the Mongol capital or as fodder in the front lines of battles.

Mongols quickly incorporated into their military the weapons and technology of the peoples they conquered. For example, when they conquered parts of China and Persia, they exploited the expertise of captured engineers who knew how to produce improved *siege weapons*, such as portable towers used to attack walled fortifications and catapults that hurled stones or other objects. To keep contact with the far reaches of the empire, Genghis Khan created a type of pony express, except instead of carrying written letters riders carried oral messages.

**Genghis Khan at Peace** Those who expected Genghis Khan to govern the way he made war were surprised. The period of Eurasian history between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is often called the *Pax Mongolica*, or Mongolian peace. Genghis Khan established the capital of his empire at *Karakorum*, near the center of what is now the modern country of Mongolia. In constructing the city and establishing his government, he consulted with scholars and engineers of Chinese and Islamic traditions. Genghis Khan may have been responsible for more new bridges than any other ruler in history. (Test Prep: List the similarities and differences between the *Pax Mongolica* and the *Pax Romana*. See page 77.)

The social policies of Genghis Khan were liberal for the day. For example, he instituted a policy of religious tolerance throughout the empire, which was quite unusual in the thirteenth century. Freed from years of warfare, Genghis Khan's soldiers took charge of protecting the Silk Road, making it safe for trade. New trade channels were also established between Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Those who survived the conquests by the Mongols and their descendants benefited from the reinvigoration of trade routes that had not been heavily used since the days of the Roman and Han Empires.

**Genghis Khan's Successor** Genghis Khan died while fighting the *Tangut Empire*, south of the Gobi Desert, in 1227. His chosen successor was his third, and reportedly his favorite, son, *Ogodei* (also spelled Ogedei), who was formally elected emperor by the Mongolian chiefs in 1229.

Ogodei's skills as a military leader could not compare with his legendary father, but under his leadership the Mongol Empire did continue to expand, making inroads into modern-day Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, as well as capturing land in the Indus Valley and southern China and invading Korea in 1231.

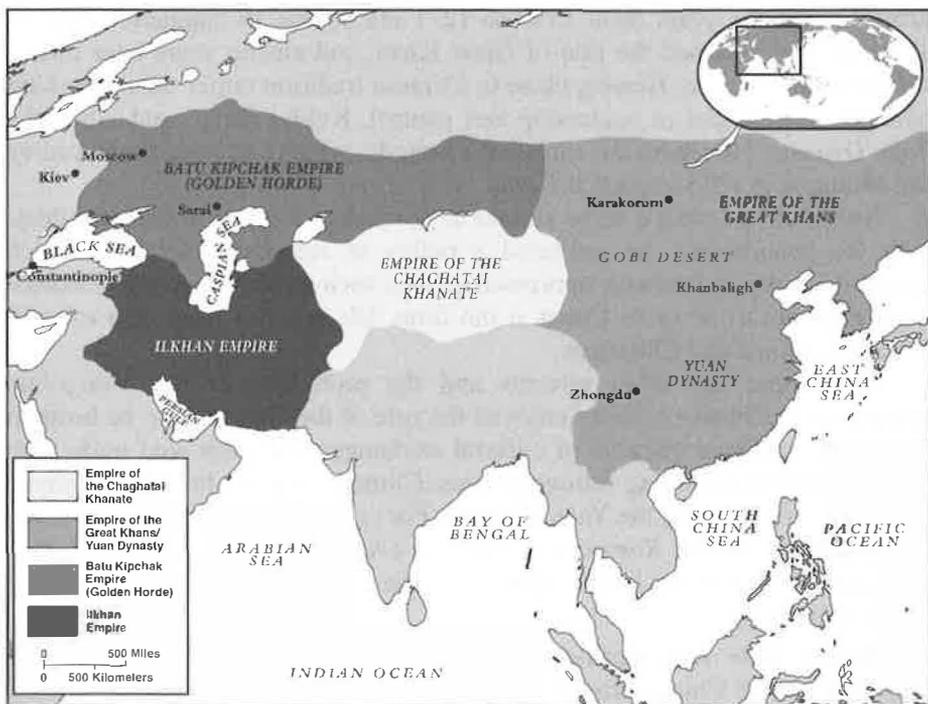
Ogodei also worked to bring a more efficient bureaucracy to the Mongolian Empire, and invested in the greater development of the capital, Karakorum. He wanted to build a permanent city with buildings rather than the traditional Mongol yurts.

khans of the Mongols except the Crimean Tatars, who were not defeated until the late eighteenth century. (Test Prep: Create a timeline tracing the history of Russia under the Mongols up to the emergence of modern Russia. See page 335.)

The Mongols had long-lasting impact on Russia. As elsewhere, Russia suffered widespread devastation and death from the Mongol attacks. But once the destruction by the Golden Horde was over, Russia began to recover. The invasions prompted Russian princes to improve their military organization and to accept the value of more centralized leadership of the region. In addition, three centuries of Mongol rule severed Russia's ties with much of Western Europe. As a result, Russia developed a more distinctly Russian culture than it had before, and resistance to the Mongols created the foundation for the modern Russian state.

**Hulegu and the Islamic Heartlands** While Batu led the western armies, *Hulegu*, another grandson of Genghis Khan, took charge of the southwest region. In 1258, Hulegu led the Mongols into the Abbasid territories, where they destroyed the city of Baghdad and killed the caliph, along with perhaps 200,000 residents of the city.

### MONGOL EMPIRES IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

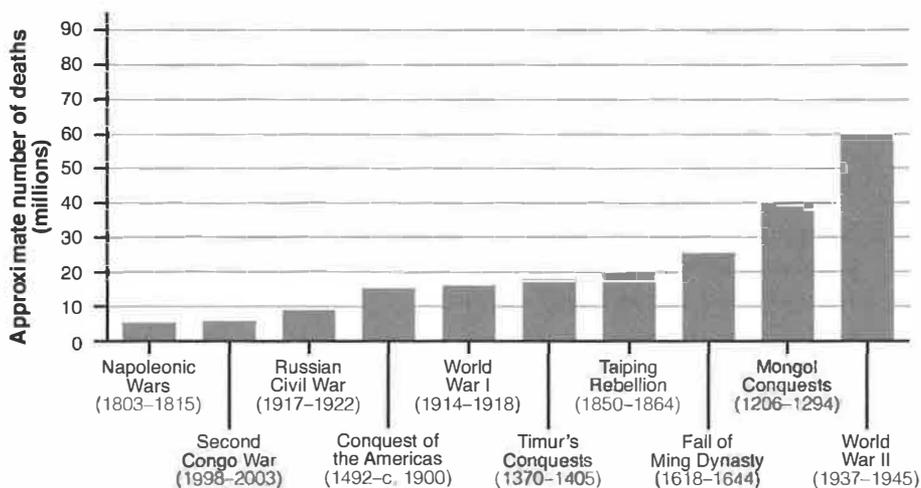


**Mongols Lose Power** Despite Kublai Khan's adoption of many Chinese customs, Mongolian leaders eventually alienated many Chinese. They hired foreigners for the government rather than native-born Chinese. By promoting Buddhists and Daoists and dismantling the civil service exam system, the Mongols distressed the Chinese scholar-gentry class who were often Confucians. Although the official policy was one of tolerance, the Mongolians tended to remain separate from the Chinese and prohibited non-Mongols from speaking Mongolian.

Just as Batu had reached the limit of Mongol expansion to the west, the Mongolian rulers of China failed to expand beyond China. Starting in 1274, the Yuan Dynasty tried and failed to conquer Japan, Indochina, Burma, and the island of Java. These defeats suggested to the already disenchanted Chinese population that the Mongols were not as fearsome as they once had been. In the 1350s, the secret *White Lotus Society* began quietly organizing to put an end to the Yuan Dynasty. In 1368, *Zhu Yuanzhang*, a Buddhist monk from a poor peasant family, led a revolt that overthrew the Yuan Dynasty and founded the *Ming Dynasty* (1368-1644).

The Mongols' defeat in China paralleled a general decline in their power elsewhere, and the empire began to shrink. The Golden Horde had lost its territory by about 1369, while Central Asian territories were conquered by Tamerlane, also known as Timur the Lame, at around the same time. (Test Prep: Create a map or series of maps showing the different empires and countries that emerged in the same territory after the fall of the Mongol Empire. See pages 353–363.)

### TEN DEADLIEST CONFLICTS IN WORLD HISTORY



Source: Matthew White, *Atrocities: The 100 Deadliest Episodes in Human History*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2012. pp. 271, 578.

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: HOW BRUTAL WAS GENGHIS KHAN?

Was Genghis Khan a brutal destroyer who murdered millions, or was he a great unifier who promoted prosperity by unifying most of Eurasia?

**The Destroyer** Many historians emphasize that Khan was a bloodthirsty tyrant. Military historian Steven R. Ward writes that “Overall, the Mongol violence and depredations killed up to three-fourths of the population of the Iranian Plateau.” Total deaths attributed to the Mongols during his rule and the rule of his descendants are in the tens of millions. Stories of his massacres of innocent people and of using unarmed civilians to protect his own soldiers show him to have little regard for human life.

**The Empire Builder** Others historians focus on Khan’s role as a great leader. Mongolian scholars, proud of their countryman, argue that charges of brutality have been exaggerated. As historians from Europe and the United States focused more on trade and toleration, they saw benefits of the Mongol rule. Genghis Khan forged a united China and established a system of Eurasian trade that renewed the links between China and Europe that had lapsed. Further, the Mongols were open to ideas and tolerant of different religions. Khan believed in a meritocracy, and he established one writing system across his empire. His rule opened the way for new systems of laws, for trade, and for cultural expansion.

**A Man of Energy** One Persian historian takes a position broad enough that everyone can agree with: “Genghis was possessed of great energy, discernment, genius, and understanding, awe-inspiring, a butcher, just, resolute, an over-thrower of enemies, intrepid, sanguinary, and cruel.”

### KEY TERMS BY THEME

#### STATE-BUILDING

Mongols  
khan  
kuriltai  
Genghis Khan  
Jurchens  
khanites  
Kara Khitai Empire  
Khwarazm Empire  
Pax Mongolica  
Karakorum  
Tangut Empire  
Ogodei  
Batu

Sarai  
Golden Horde  
Moscow  
Battle of Kulikovo  
Hulegu  
Baibars  
Il-khanate  
Kublai Khan  
Yuan Dynasty  
Dadu  
White Lotus Society  
Zhu Yuanzhang  
Ming Dynasty

#### ENVIRONMENT

Gobi Desert  
yurt

#### TECHNOLOGY

tumens  
siege weapons

#### CULTURE

*The Romance of the  
West Chamber*  
Marco Polo

**Questions 4 to 6 refer to the passage below.**

“The [Russian] Duke who had spoken before gave a short account of all that had taken place since the death of [Genghis Khan], and the partition of his vast dominions. And then the younger Duke, Wsewolodovics, took up the tale.

‘Lord King!’ he began, ‘these Mongols don’t carry on warfare in an honorable, chivalrous way. They fight only to destroy, they are bloodthirsty, merciless; their only object is to plunder, slay, murder, and burn, not even to make any use of what lands they conquer. They are like a swarm of locusts. They stay till everything is eaten up, till all are plundered, and what they can’t carry off, that they kill, or reduce to ashes. They are utterly faithless; their words and promises are not in the least to be trusted, and those who do make friends with them are the first upon whom they wreak their vengeance if anything goes wrong. We are telling you no fairy tales! We know to our own cost what they are, we tell you what we have seen with our own eyes. And let me tell you this, my lord king, their lust of conquest and devastation knows *no bounds*! If it is our turn today, it will be yours tomorrow! And, therefore, while we seek a refuge in your land, we at the same time warn you to be prepared! For the storm is coming, and may sweep across your frontiers sooner than you think for.’”

Baron Nicholas Jósika (1796–1865), *Neath the Hoof of the Tartar, or The Scourge of God*, a novel about the Mongols

4. Which statement best states the Russian duke’s view of the Mongols?
  - (A) The Mongols were interested only in plunder and treasure but not in controlling Russian territory.
  - (B) The Mongols used horse-mounted warfare and gunpowder to completely overpower and destroy their enemies.
  - (C) The Russians had been fooled by rumors of Mongol atrocities.
  - (D) The Russians lost because they were inexperienced in warfare.
  
5. The most valid counterargument to the description of the Mongols by the Russian duke was that the Mongols
  - (A) took only what they needed to survive from people they conquered
  - (B) appreciated architecture and art and, hence, rarely destroyed cities
  - (C) had no reason to invade other areas west of Russia
  - (D) established political institutions in the territories they conquered
  
6. How would the Mongols use the Russian duke’s description to their advantage if they chose to invade Hungary?
  - (A) to frighten the Hungarians into surrendering
  - (B) to persuade Hungarians to fight against other Christian kingdoms
  - (C) to cause the Hungarians to convert to Islam
  - (D) to attract Hungarian knights who admired their style of warfare

## SHORT-ANSWER QUESTIONS

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### 1. Use the passage below to answer all parts of the question that follows.

“And the Monarch of the World, the Hatim of the Age, [Mengü] Qa’an [Khan] passed away, Güyük, his eldest son had not returned from the campaign against the Qifchaq, and therefore in accordance with precedent the dispatch of orders and the assembling of the people took place at the door of the . . . palace of his wife, Möge Khatun. . . . But since Törengene Khatun was the mother of his eldest sons and was moreover shrewder and more sagacious than Möge Khatun, she [Törengene Khatun] sent messages to the princes, i.e. the brothers and nephews of the Qa’an . . . and said that until a Khan was appointed by agreement someone would have to be ruler and leader in order that the business of the state might not be neglected nor the affairs of the commonwealth thrown into confusion; in order, too, that the army and the court might be kept under control and the interests of the people protected. . . . therefore, until a quriltai [an assembly of Mongol nobles] was held, it was she [Törengene Khatun] that should direct the affairs of the state, and the old ministers should remain in the service of the Court, so that the old and new yasas [political structure or order] might not be changed from what was the law.”

Ala-ad Din Ata-Malik Juvaini, a Persian scholar from the thirteenth century, *The History of the Conqueror*

- a) Identify ONE reason why the Mongol nobles accepted the political leadership of a woman.
- b) Identify ONE continuity in Mongol leadership under Törengene Khatun and previous khans.
- c) Identify ONE difference in the status of women in Islamic society in the thirteenth century and the status of women in Mongol culture during the thirteenth century.

### 2. Answer all parts of the question that follows.

- a) Explain ONE similarity in the political structure of the Yuan Dynasty and the Il-khan Empire.
- b) Explain ONE difference in the political structure of the Yuan Dynasty and the Empire of the Golden Horde.
- c) Explain ONE difference in the social structure of China as a result of the establishment of the Yuan Dynasty.

## WRITE AS A HISTORIAN: CONSIDER THE CULTURE

In an essay examining a specific topic, consider the cultural setting of the topic. For example, in evaluating the Mongols' success in warfare, consider the role of horses in their culture. *Choose the background information most relevant to each sentence.*

1. The period when Genghis Khan ruled most of Asia is sometimes referred to as the Pax Mongolica.
  - a. Religious tolerance became an accepted aspect of life under Genghis Khan.
  - b. Khan ruled harshly and maintained a reputation as a frightening combatant.
2. Kublai Khan helped China experience economic success during his rule.
  - a. The prosperity allowed Chinese literature and arts to flourish.
  - b. Kublai Khan enabled cultural exchanges and improved relationships between countries, which facilitated global trade.
3. During the thirteenth century, Russia was forced to create a more centralized political system, specifically regarding their military.
  - a. The invasion of the Golden Horde helped Russians realize the flaws of their fragmented government.
  - b. While Batu controlled Russia, the representatives from city-states were required to send tributes to the Mongolians.
4. Many Europeans who read Marco Polo's book in the fourteenth century doubted he was telling the truth about China.
  - a. China's level of technology and wealth were far above the level in Europe during Polo's time.
  - b. Europeans who were able to read during Polo's time were taught to be skeptical of what they read and heard.